

Skills Iowa Questions and Answers

What is Skills Iowa?

Skills Iowa provides two technology tools to Iowa schools and the training and support to implement them through a federal grant:

Skills Tutor provides 5 – 10 minute tutorials in reading comprehension, vocabulary, mathematics, language, library skills and some science to students in grades 3 -12.

Assessment Center is a tool that can be used to assess student learning in grades 3-12 in reading comprehension, mathematics and the conventions of language. Teachers, parents, and students get a better understanding of what students know and don't know. Teachers are supported in determining where to go next with their instruction.

Both of these programs have excellent reporting features that can organize data and provide specific information to students, teachers, and parents much more quickly than has been possible in the past. As in the business world, the computer can be used to do things we have traditionally done in schools by hand more quickly and efficiently.

IASB provides not only the tools but also the training and support for implementation of the tools. The research is clear that unless educators receive significant training and support, most educational innovations will go by the wayside. So to help ensure implementation with students and resulting student learning, we provide the necessary support for implementation. Both of these tools are web-based, so students, teachers, principals, and parents can access them wherever they have access to the Internet – at home, at school, at the public library or community centers. These tools and the training and support to implement them are provided at no cost to the local district and paid for by the grant.

How many schools and student participate in Skills Iowa this year and what is the history of the program?

Currently Skills Iowa serves approximately 85,000 Iowa kids in 114 school districts in 300 buildings in Iowa. A list of the 300 participating school buildings this year is available at the Skills Iowa website: <http://www.ia-sb.org/skillsiowa/skillsiaschools.aspx>

Skills Iowa originally came to Iowa as a program called Following the Leaders (FTL). It was funded through a multi-state grant to a group called the Educational Leaders Council (ELC). Iowa was one of 12 states targeted by ELC to participate in FTL. The first year there were just a few Iowa schools. IASB was approached by one of the vendors, Michael Perik, to work to get this program in place in Iowa schools. For the first three years, IASB was a subcontractor to Achievement Technologies. Achievement Technologies was Mr. Perik's company and the vendor for Skills Tutor. Starting in the 2004-05 school year, IASB's role was to recruit schools to participate and also to provide the training and support to the schools.

Below are the number of school buildings participating in Skills Iowa since IASB was involved starting in the 2004-05 school year:

- 2004-05 - 93 school buildings (acted as a subcontractor for Achievement Technologies, received \$315,070 in gross revenue)
- 2005-06 - 222 school buildings (acted as a subcontractor for Achievement Technologies, received \$480,000 in gross revenue)
- 2006-07 - 210 school buildings (received a \$298,111 state grant – spent all but approx. \$8,000)
- 2007-08 - 225 school buildings (received a \$2,651,888 state grant – not all was spent)

2008-09 - 225 school buildings (received a \$2,394,015 federal grant – not all was spent. Also received a \$500,000 state grant)
2009-10 - 300 school buildings (received a \$3,330,000 federal grant)

Not all schools have been in the program for the entire time. Sometimes schools decide the Skills Iowa tools don't work for them, so they drop out. There is no mandate for participation. Schools decide if it works for them.

Who works on Skills Iowa and what do they do?

Susie Olesen, a full time IASB employee, is the project director. Prior to the 2009-10 school year, she directed this grant part time and also provided board development services. Shortly after the 2009-10 school year began, she was assigned to Skills Iowa full time. She was a teacher for 29 years and part-time curriculum director for approximately 6 years of those 29 years. She spent the majority of her educational career at Greenfield, which is now Nodaway Valley, but taught also in Lisbon and Mt. Vernon in the early 1970s. She has her BA and MA degrees from the University of Iowa in education. In addition, she received 24 graduate hours from Drake University in school administration. She recruits schools for participation, supervises the training staff, communicates with the schools, the vendor, and Senator Harkin's office, provides professional development to the Skills Iowa training staff, writes a school improvement newsletter called *Raising the Bar*, and other duties related to the grant.

Seventeen people with Iowa teaching licenses who are either former or retired teachers provide the training and support to schools and are paid through contractual agreements. New schools receive 6-8 hours of initial training and then extensive follow up and support throughout the year, depending on their local needs and availability. Returning schools receive a beginning of the year training time of 3-4 hours and also follow-up and support based on their local needs and availability. This training and support is critical to the implementation of the Skills Iowa technology tools.

What does the research say about programs like Skills Iowa?

Skills Iowa personnel encourage schools to use both Assessment Center and Skills Tutor as formative assessment data. Formative assessment is an educational practice where teachers use information from students to determine what to teach next based on what kids have demonstrated they know and can do (or don't know and can't do). Paul Black and Dylan William studied all the research related to formative assessment and wrote an article in a well respected educational journal called *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1998. They said, "All these studies show that innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains."

Skills Iowa is certainly not the only kind of formative assessment data teachers use. Teachers have a myriad of data at their fingertips and effective teachers use it all. They observe and listen to students regularly and learn more about what those students know and can do. Effective teachers examine the daily work of their students. They create short assessments on the spot to determine what students know and act on that immediately. They look at projects students have created. They study end-of-unit assessment results whether those results are traditional tests or student created projects. Effective teachers use whatever kids produce to inform their instruction. Skills Iowa provides information teachers can add to their rich data environment. The advantage Skills Iowa provides is that the Assessment Center program is aligned to the Iowa Core Curriculum and the data gathered from these assessments is well organized and provides excellent information regarding what skills and concepts students have learned and what they have not in an organized, easy-to-read fashion.

Besides providing data for teachers to analyze, Skills Tutor provides practice in the basic skills. Just as children need practice to learn to play the piano or basketball or complete their daily

chores well, they also need practice in the math facts, reading, the conventions of grammar, and other topics provided in the Skills Tutor program.

Can technology replace teachers?

Absolutely not. In those classrooms where Skills Iowa is used well, principals and faculties determine how to use the tools in ways that best supports the learning of students. Skills Iowa, nor any technology program, will ever take the place of a fine teacher, but Skills Iowa can provide important tools, data, and information as teachers provide practice, remediation, and acceleration for their students.

When are students expected to use the Skills Iowa tools?

Each school determines how the Skills Iowa tools will work best for them. Some students use the tools during computer lab time or in the library. In some classrooms there are learning centers where students can use the Skills Iowa tools. Some teachers use the tutorials to teach a concept to the whole class on an overhead projector as a way to introduce a concept or skill. Some students are assigned Skills Iowa work as homework and either do it in the lab or classroom before or after school, at the community center, at the public library, at home, or at a friend's home.

How do schools become involved in the program?

IASB has sent out numerous emails to school superintendents inviting them to learn more about the program. If a school responds with interest, Susie Olesen, the project director, or another person working for Skills Iowa, goes to the school and demonstrates the use of the tools, usually to a leadership team from the interested school. At that meeting, participation requirements are provided.

If you have anymore questions about Skills Iowa, send Susie an email at solesen@ia-sb.org. Additional information can be found at the Skills Iowa website: www.skillsiowa.org